

Message Text

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CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 KUALA LUMPUR 0141

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: EINV, PINT, PGOV, MY
SUBJECT: IMPLICATIONS OF GOM CABINET CHANGES

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 0018 (NOTAL)
B. KUALA LUMPUR 0032 (NOTAL)
C. KUALA LUMPUR 0033 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION. AS REPORTED REFTELS, A NUMBER OF MALAYSIAN CABINET AND SUBCABINET MEMBERS WERE REASSIGNED TO NEW POSTS IN A MODERATE RESHUFFLE ANNOUNCED BY PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN ONN DECEMBER 31. THE SHIFTS WERE SIGNIFICANT IN SEVERAL REGARDS, INCLUDING THEIR BEARING ON THE POLITICAL FUTURES OF SEVERAL PROMINENT MALAYSIAN FIGURES, SOME EMERGING AS CLEAR WINNERS AND OTHERS AS LOSERS. TWO MINISTERS WHO HAD FIGURED IN MAJOR CONTROVERSIES OVER THEIR RESPECTIVE DEALINGS WITH BUSINESSMEN AND THE LEGAL COMMUNITY HAVE BEEN MOVED TO POSITIONS
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OF LESSER IMPORTANCE, AND THE INEFFECTIVE HEALTH MINISTER WAS DISMISSED. THESE MOVES EMPHASIZE THE PRIME MINISTER'S AWARENESS OF THE NEED TO IMPROVE GOVERNMENTAL PERFORMANCE, PARTICULARLY IN THE KEY AREA OF STIMULATING INVESTMENT BY BOTH LOCAL AND FOREIGN BUSINESSES, AND TO DAMPEN CONTROVERSY IN WHAT IS GENERALLY BELIEVED TO BE AN ELECTION

YEAR. OF SPECIAL INTEREST WAS THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMED WAS ASSUMING THE TRADE AND INDUSTRY PORTFOLIO, A MOVE WHICH HAS BEEN ENTHUSIASTICALLY ENDORSED BY DOMESTIC (PARTICULARLY CHINESE) AND FOREIGN BUSINESSMEN ALIKE. WITH REGARD TO IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS, WHILE WE ARE DISAPPOINTED WITH THE DEPARTURE OF LAW MINISTER/ATTORNEY GENERAL TAN SRI ABDUL KADIR YUSOF FROM HIS POST IN VIEW OF HIS CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH TO LOS NEGOTIATIONS, ON THE WHOLE WE VIEW THESE MOVES AS POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS. NOT ONLY DO U.S. BUSINESSMEN FEEL THAT DR. MAHATHIR WILL BE MORE EFFECTIVE AND RESPONSIVE TO THEIR CONCERNS BUT IF INDEED THE ECONOMY IS STRENGTHENED BY HIS APPOINTMENT AND SUBSIDIARY MOVES THIS WOULD HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON COMMUNAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL STABILITY HERE. ALTHOUGH PRIOR SPECULATION HELD THAT THE MAGNITUDE OF THE RESHUFFLE WOULD PROVIDE FURTHER CLUES TO THE TIMING OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, THE ACTUAL CHANGES HAVE NOT PROVED CONCLUSIVE IN THIS REGARD. NONETHELESS SINCE VIRTUALLY ALL THE FACES IN THE CABINET ARE HOLDOVERS FROM THE RAZAK ERA WE BELIEVE THE ODDS FAVOR HUSSEIN CALLING EARLY ELECTIONS (I.E., BY THE THIRD QUARTER OF THIS YEAR) THAT WOULD ENABLE HIM TO REASSEMBLE HIS "OWN" CABINET. END SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION. CONFIDENTIAL

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2. WHILE THE CABINET AND SUB-CABINET CHANGES ANNOUNCED BY PM HUSSEIN ON DECEMBER 31 HAVE CERTAIN IMPLICATIONS FOR GOM POLICY AND ADMINISTRATIVE EFFECTIVENESS, THEY ARE ALSO OF CONSIDERABLE SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CLUES THEY HOLD FOR THE POLITICAL FUTURES OF INDIVIDUALS IN THE GOVERNMENT. THE MOST IMPORTANT POLICY ORIENTED SHIFT WAS DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMED'S MOVE FROM EDUCATION TO THE TRADE AND INDUSTRY MINISTRY, INDICATING THE IMPORTANCE PM HUSSEIN PLACES ON STIMULATING PRIVATE INVESTMENT, BOTH DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN. MAHATHIR'S PREDECESSOR IN THE JOB, DATUK HAMZAH ABU SAMAH, WAS GENERALLY REGARDED AS INCOMPETENT AND IT WAS DURING HIS INCUMBENCY THAT THE GOM PASSED THE CONTROVERSIAL INDUSTRIAL COORDINATION ACT (ICA). THE ICA WAS (AND IS) FEARED BY THE MOSTLY CHINESE LOCAL BUSINESS COMMUNITY AS GIVING TOO MUCH POWER TO THE MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY TO INTERFERE IN THEIR BUSINESS OPERATIONS AND HAS BEEN A MAJOR FACTOR IN THE SLUGGISH RATE OF GROWTH IN PRIVATE INVESTMENT, THE CHIEF CAUSE FOR THE STRONG LAG IN

MEETING THIRD MALAYSIAN PLAN TARGETS. HAMZAH WAS NOT SEEN AS BRIGHT OR STRONG ENOUGH TO ENSURE THAT HIS SUBORDINATES IN THE BUREAUCRACY WOULD IMPLEMENT THE ICA REASONABLY, AND HE HAD AN EMOTIONAL VESTED INTEREST IN THE ACT WHICH PREVENTED HIM FROM CONSIDERING FURTHER AMENDMENTS. MAHATHIR, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAS HEADED A SPECIAL CABINET COMMITTEE ON INVESTMENT FOR OVER A YEAR AND IN THAT POSITION HAS GAINED THE CONFIDENCE OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. HIS APPOINTMENT AS TRADE AND INDUSTRY MINISTER HAS BEEN ENTHUSIASTICALLY WELCOMED BY THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. IT IS, OF COURSE, TOO EARLY TO TELL IF MAHATHIR INTENDS TO MODIFY THE ICA. ONE FACTOR ARGUING AGAINST SUCH A STEP IS THAT IT WOULD
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AROUSE THE MALAY NATIONALISTS AGAINST HIM, AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION NOW THAT THE PAN MALAYSIAN ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS) IS BACK IN THE OPPOSITION. HE ALSO, HOWEVER, HAS A STUBBORN STREAK IN HIM

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MUCH LIKE THE PRIME MINISTER AND IT IS NOT INCONCEIVABLE THAT HE WOULD BE WILLING TO RUN SOME RISKS IN SUPPORT OF WHAT HE MIGHT SEE AS THE GREATER GOOD, AND THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT THE ECONOMIC HEALTH OF THE COUNTRY IS THE STRONGEST GUARANTEE OF STABILITY.

3. PERHAPS THE BIGGEST WINNER IN THE CABINET SHIFT IS THE NEW EDUCATION MINISTER DATUK MUSA HITAM. EDUCATION MINISTER IS ONE OF THE POLITICALLY MOST POWERFUL POSITIONS IN THE GOM BECAUSE MALAY SCHOOL-TEACHERS REPORTEDLY MAKE UP ALMOST HALF THE UMNO RANK AND FILE MEMBERSHIP AND THE MINISTER IS IN POSITION TO PROVIDE POLITICAL PATRONAGE AND GARNER VOTES AT UMNO PARTY ELECTIONS. THIS HAS PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE TRIENNIAL UMNO ELECTIONS WHICH ARE DUE IN JULY, SINCE IT IS LIKELY THAT ONE OR TWO OF THE THREE ELECTED UMNO VICE PRESIDENCIES WILL BE VACATED (MAHATHIR WILL PROBABLY BE ELECTED

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DEPUTY PRESIDENT AND FORMER AGRICULTURE MINISTER GHAFAR BABA MIGHT BE DROPPED); MUSA'A SELECTION AS EDUCATION MINISTER IS ALMOST AS ENDORSEMENT BY HUSSEIN FOR ONE OF THE VICE PRESIDENCIES. FOR SIMILAR REASONS, MAHATHIR'S DEPARTURE FROM THE EDUCATION MINISTRY IS A GOOD SIGN THAT BOTH THE AND HUSSEIN FEEL HIS POLITICAL POSITION IS SECURE ENOUGH THAT HE NO LONGER NEEDS TO RELY ON THE KIND OF PATRONAGE HE HAS USED IN THE PAST.

4. HAMZAH'S SHIFT FROM TRADE AND INDUSTRY TO BE LAW MINISTER AND ATTORNEY GENERAL IS A DEFINITE DEMOTION; HUSSEIN IS NOT TOLERANT OF INCOMPETENCE IN HIS SUBORDINATES, BUT WOULD HAVE HAD GREAT DIFFICULTY IN SIMPLY FIRING HAMZAH FROM THE CABINET BECAUSE HAMZAH IS A BROTHER-IN-LAW OF FORMER PM RAZAK AND THUS ALSO RELATED TO HUSSEIN BY MARRIAGE. HIS NEW POSITION IS ONE OF LESSER IMPORTANCE BUT GREAT PRESTIGE AND IS SUITED TO HAMZAH'S BACKGROUND AS A FORMER CIVIL SERVANT IN THE SAME MINISTRY.

5. THE TRANSFER OF FORMER LAW MINISTER TAN SRI ABDUL KADIR YUSOF TO THE MINISTRY OF LANDS AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS PROBABLY A TEMPORARY ONE PRIOR TO KADIR'S RETIREMENT. KADIR HAS FOR OVER A YEAR MADE KNOWN PUBLICLY HIS DESIRE TO LEAVE THE GOVERNMENT AND IN RECENT MONTHS HAS HAD PROBLEMS IN HIS JOB (E.G. THE QUARREL WITH THE MALAYAN BAR

COUNCIL OVER SECURITY LEGISLATION). BUT KADIR IS ONE OF HUSSEIN'S FEW CONFIDANTS AND HAS TAKEN OVER THE MINISTRY FORMERLY HELD BY DATUK ASRI MUDA, THE PRESIDENT OF THE PAN MALAYSIAN ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS
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WHICH RECENTLY LEFT THE NATIONAL FRONT AND JOINED THE OPPOSITION; KADIR WILL PROBABLY BE EXPECTED TO WEEK OUT ASRI SUPPORTERS AND RESTORE THE LOWER LEVELS OF THE MINISTRY TO UMNO CONTROL.

6. THE APPOINTMENT OF MCA'S TAN SRI CHONG HON NYAN AS HEALTH MINISTER TO REPLACE LEE SIOK YEW IS SEEN BY MANY OBSERVERS AS A DEMOTION. CHONG HAD BEEN MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S DEPARTMENT AND HAD PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN ECONOMIC PLANNING; HIS NEW JOB IS A MINOR ONE TRADITIONALLY RESERVED FOR LESSER MCA POLITICIANS. CHONG HAD A BAD YEAR IN 1977 WHEN HE POORLY HANDLED MCA POLITICS IN HIS HOMESTATE OF MALACCA, THEN WAS FEATED FOR THE PARTY DEPUTY PRESIDENCY EVEN THOUGH HE WAS PRESIDENT LEE SAN CHOON'S CHOICE FOR THE JOB. THE PROMOTION OF RICHARD HO TO FULL MINISTER IN CHONG'S OLD POSITION BODES WELL FOR HIS POLITICAL FUTURE.

7. THE TRANSFER OF DATUK AMAR TAIB MAHMUD FROM THE INFORMATION MINISTRY TO PRIMARY INDUSTRIES PROBABLY BEARS LESS ON TAIB'S FUTURE THAN ON THE NEED TO FILL MUSA'S SHOES WITH ANOTHER COMPETENT MEMBER OF THE CABINET. TAIB (WHO IS NOT AN UMNO MEMBER--HE IS FROM SARAWAK) IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE BESTMEN IN THE GOVERNMENT AND HAS HELD THE PRIMARY INDUSTRIES PORTFOLIO BEFORE. ONE OF THE TWO UMNO DEPUTY MINISTERS PROMOTED TO FULL MINISTER, DATUK MOHAMED RAHMAT, WILL REPLACE TAIB AT INFORMATION; THE OTHER, DATUK SHARIFF AHMAD, WILL FILL THE VACANT POSITION AT AGRICULTURE. THE INFORMATION JOB IS THE MORE IMPORTANT ONE AND MOHAMED RAHMAT'S SELECTION FOR THE POSITION PROBABLY REFLECTS HUSSEIN'S HIGHER ESTIMATION OF HIM. (NEITHER MOHAMED NOR SHARIFF IS CONSIDERED A COMER IN UMNO
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POLITICS--BUT THEY WERE THE UMNO DEPUTY MINISTERS LONGEST IN OFFICE AND THUS LOGICAL CHOICES FOR

PROMOTION.)

8. THIS CABINET SHUFFLE IS ALSO SIGNIFICANT FOR SOME THINGS THAT DID NOT HAPPEN; THE GOVERNMENT IS STILL LARGELY THE ONE INHERITED BY HUSSEIN ON THE DEATH OF RAZAK. NO ONE HAS YET BEEN DISMISSED FROM A CABINET POSITION IN THE TWO YEARS HUSSEIN HAS BEEN PRIME MINISTER (EXCEPT HEALTH MINISTER LEE SIOK YEW WHO WAS DROPPED THIS TIME AT THE INSISTENCE OF LEE SAN CHOON; SIOK YEW ALSO FAILED TO GAIN MCA PARTY OFFICE LAST YEAR). THERE WERE ALSO NO NEW MEN NAMED TO THE GOVERNMENT DURING THIS

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RESHUFFLE. SEVERAL OF THE MINISTERS WHO REMAINED IN THEIR OLD JOBS THEREBY SURVIVED RUMORS (OR HOPES) THAT THEY MIGHT BE DEMOTED OR DISMISSED. THE PRESS HAD SPECULATED THAT HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER GHAZALI SHAFIE WOULD MOVE TO MFA, A MOVE WHICH WOULD HAVE MEANT HE WOULD BE PUSHED OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM OF UMNO POLITICS. LIKEWISE, A SHIFT OF TENGKU RAZALEIGH FROM THE FINANCE MINISTER WOULD HAVE BEEN WELCOMED BY MANY IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY AS THE PERFECT COMPLEMENT TO THE TRANSFER OF HAMZAH FROM TRADE AND INDUSTRY.

ANOTHER MAN WHO WAS NOT DISMISSED WAS LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND FEDERAL TERRITORY MINISTER HAJI HASSAN ADLI, WHO WAS EXPELLED FROM PAS WHEN HE SIDED WITH THE UMNO POSITION IN THE KELANTAN DISPUTE. HASSAN REMAINS AN AN INDEPENDENT MP AND MINISTER; HE WILL PROBABLY JOIN EITHER UMNO OR THE NEW UMNO-BACKED PARTY BEING FORMED TO OPPOSE PAS IN KELANTAN.
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HASSAN'S RETENTION IS A SIGN THAT THERE WILL BE NO EARLY UMNO-PAS RECONCILIATION.

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. WE CAN BE CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC THAT MAHATHIR'S APPOINTMENT WILL MEAN AN EASIER TIME FOR U.S. INVESTORS IN MALAYSIA; HE HAS BEEN BEHIND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A "ONE-STOP" AGENCY FOR NEW INVESTORS (A MEANS OF EASING THE BUREAUCRATIC HASSLES OF STARTING TO DO BUSINESS HERE) FOR SEVERAL MONTHS, AND HE REITERATED THE IMPORTANCE HE ATTACHES TO THE PROPOSAL JUST AFTER HIS NEW APPOINTMENT. WHETHER MAHATHIR'S GOOD INTENTIONS AND ACTIVIST ORIENTATION CAN OVERCOME DEEPLY IMBEDDED BUREAUCRATIC HABITS IN THE MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY IS ANOTHER QUESTION. HOWEVER HIS NEW DEPUTIES IN THIS MINISTRY, LEW SIP HON AND MANAN OTHMAN ARE BOTH CONSIDERED ABLE AND SHOULD HELP PROVIDE FIRMER DIRECTION TO THIS MINISTRY THAN WAS THE CASE DURING HAMZAH'S INCUMBENCY. HAMZAH'S REPLACEMENT OF KADIR IN THE LAW MINISTRY HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USG IN BOTH THE LAW OF THE SEA NEGOTIATIONS (REFTEL C) AND IN NARCOTICS. BOTH KADIR AND HIS DEPUTY RAIS YATIM HAD TAKEN AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN NARCOTICS MATTERS IN THE LAW MINISTRY. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT ROLE HAMZAH WILL PLAY IN NARCOTICS, BUT RAIS HAS BEEN SHIFTED TO THE HOME AFFAIRS MINISTRY (WHICH CONTROLS THE POLICE) AND PRESUMABLY WILL STILL BE OUR CHIEF SENIOR CONTACT ON THE SUBJECT. RAIS REMAINS PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION AGAINST DRUG ABUSE (PEMADAM). TAIB MAHMUD'S CREDENTIALS AS REPLACEMENT AT PRIMARY INDUSTRIES FOR THE COMPETENT, DYNAMIC AND GENERALLY MODERATE MUSA HITAM SUGGEST THAT HE IS WELL SUITED
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FOR THIS IMPORTANT POST. HE IS SOPHISTICATED AND HAS HAD CONSIDERABLE EXPERIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL

AFFAIRS. FURTHERMORE BUSINESSMEN WHO KNEW HIM WHEN HE LAST SERVED AS PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTER CONSIDER HIM REASONABLE TO DEAL WITH (ACCORDING TO SOME REPORTS FROM LOCAL OBSERVERS HIS ALLEGEDLY OVERLY FAVORABLE DISPOSITION TOWARDS BUSINESSMEN IRRITIATED LATE PRIME MINISTER RAZAK AND LED TO HIS DEMOTION TO A LESS IMPORTANT MINISTRY IN 1974).

10. BEFORE THE NEW CABINET WAS ANNOUNCED IT WAS CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IN POLITICAL CIRCLES THAT A SMALL-SCALE ADJUSTMENT TO FILL VACANCIES WOULD MEAN THAT HUSSEIN HAD DECIDED ON ELECTIONS VERY SOON, PROBABLY BEFORE MID-YEAR. ON THE OTHER HAND, A COMPREHENSIVE RESHUFFLE COULD BE TAKEN AS A SIGN THAT ELECTIONS WOULD PROBABLY BE HELD AS SCHEDULED IN 1979. THE PROBLEM IS NOW THAT NO ONE KNOWS HOW TO INTERPRET THE RESHUFFLE AS IT FINALLY OCCURRED. A NUMBER OF PORTFOLIOS CHANGED HANDS, BUT THE GOVERNMENT IS COMPOSED OF ESSENTIALLY THE SAME MEN AS BEFORE; SO, THE TIMING OF THE NEXT ELECTIONS IS AS UNCLEAR AS EVER TO LOCAL OBSERVERS. WE CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THEY WILL BE EARLIER RATHER THAN LATER, THOUGH. THE GOM'S UMNO LEADERS PERCEIVE PAS AS THEIR MAIN RIVALS IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS, AND PAS IS STILL IN DISARRAY OVER ITS WITHDRAWAL FROM THE NATIONAL FRONT. PAS PRESIDENT ASRI FACED OPPOSITION FROM THE RANK AND FILE AT A RECENT PARTY MEETING AND A NUMBER OF PAS MEMBERS HAVE RESIGNED FROM THE PARTY; PAS' FINANCES ARE ALSO SAID TO BE IN POOR SHAPE. IT WOULD BEHOOVE THE GOM TO HOLD ELECTIONS SOONER RATHER THAN LATER TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PAS' PROBLEMS, BECAUSE MOST OBSERVERS SEE ASRI AS AN EXTREMELY CAPABLE POLITICIAN WHO WILL, GIVEN ENOUGH TIME, BUILD UP THE PARTY
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INTO FORMIDABLE CHALLENGER TO UMNO. ALSO, IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT PM HUSSEIN HAS NOT YET ELIMINATED THE "DEAD WOOD" AND MOLDED THE CABINET ENTIRELY TO HIS OWN LIKING. PART OF THE REASON WAS UNDOUBTEDLY TO AVOID ALIENATING ANY ELEMENTS OF UMNO IN ANTICIPATION OF THE COMING UMNO ELECTION, BUT HUSSEIN MAY WELL BE WAITING FOR AN EARLY ELECTORAL MANDATE BEFORE MAKING SWEEPING CHANGES IN HIS GOVERNMENT.
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